

NARROW BOATS AND WIDE HORIZONS,

life between the wars

by

RIGBY DEBNEY TAYLOR

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Acknowledgements

To my daughter Margaret, whose encouragement enabled me to start in the first place, also to my wife Joan whose perseverance made the transcription of my scribble possible.

Author's note

My sister Nancy, reading these memories, said, "I thought your memories rather sad; I never realised how hard our lives were."

Here I must emphasise that we never felt sad, these reminiscences are of our lives as they were lived; these lives were regarded as normal, and were accepted by us as such.

R. T.

INTRODUCTION

This is the life of Rigby Debney Taylor (1914-2009). Setting down his reminiscences of his early years was one of my father's retirement projects (he never liked to be idle), and this he did in the 1980s.

My brother and I had grown up with his tales of the canal-side and country life, but after his death in 2009, I revisited Rigby's memoirs and was struck by just how far he had come in life. He was a truly self-educated man who came from a loving but very poor family background, but he took an interest in art, literature, politics, history – and life. He had a generosity of spirit and shared everything he knew with everyone he knew. He managed not only to buy his own house in 1939, marry the girl of his dreams and subsequently raise two successful children, but became a skilled tool-maker and rose to managerial levels before he retired.

Margaret Loveridge, 2010

CHAPTER I

Memories of my early years are obviously somewhat hazy and, at best, only consist of impressions: mainly “don’t ...” and warnings. Don’t go near the copper – a cast iron tub set in a brick hearth – don’t go near the canal, mind the horses, keep away from the bantams, etc. I must have been an inquisitive child because I used to be tied to the table leg with a scarf to keep me away from the various don’ts while Mother attended to my small sister.



Robert Taylor, my father



Myself aged 2 years 5 months

Possibly my earliest memory is that of being taken, sitting on a cushion on the crossbar of Dad’s bike, to the village cricket matches. Dad was a keen cricketer and, although only a navvy on the canal, was much in demand by the local cricketing fraternity. At Whitacre I would be left in the care of the tea ladies. At Middleton it was the *Green Man*, then a farm-cum-ale-house, now an upmarket country pub. I have a vivid memory of the landlord, a Mr Stevenson, sitting by the fireside, jug to hand – ale was from the barrel in the cellar – dog at his feet, and his leggings (they always fascinated me), brown and highly polished – the whole scene like one of Doveston’s pictures. The beer was fetched in the jug and served through a hatch in the main room which served as a kitchen, living room, or

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parlour as the occasion demanded. The room with its quarry tiled floor was dominated by a large four legged kitchen table and chairs. Although having a scrubbed top, when not in use the table was covered with a chenille tablecloth with which I was allowed to amuse myself by trying to count the bobbles round the edge.

Born at the outbreak of the First World War, my positive memories, apart from the above, do not start until infants' school in the spring of 1919, and to understand the traumas that the first twelve months at school engendered one must first understand our childhood background.

We, my sister and I, were born and lived in a canal-side cottage which is a hundred yards inside the Warwickshire border, and known as Bottom Lock, Bodymoor Heath. The Birmingham Navigation Company had its own system of numbering. Above the number on the wall was a cast iron plaque with the letters MDCCCXX which puzzled us for years until someone said "They are Roman numerals". Roman? Who or what were the Romans? That was the first indication that there was something missing in my education, a situation only partly remedied when my sister (she was only 15 months younger than I) won a scholarship to Tamworth Girls High School. I probably learnt more from her homework than I learnt in my own last few years at school.

The cottage, one of a pair, was half a mile away from the nearest lane and access was by the canal towpath. Conditions were, I now realise, extremely primitive. No cars, televisions, telephones, refrigerators, washing machines – all the everyday things we now take for granted. No bathroom, a stone sink only; no flush sanitation, only an earth privy fifty yards down the garden. We did have one cold water tap (laid on primarily I suspect to water the barge horses), but no gas or electricity. To say that we were a fairly isolated community is an understatement: there was no community at all and extreme isolation is nearer the mark.



*My parents, Robert and Annie Taylor, outside our home
at Bottom Lock, Bodymore Heath on the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal.*

CHAPTER II

The nearest school was at Kingsbury. With no means of transport whatever, the walk to Kingsbury was some three miles by the 'low road' – not a road at all but a field path across the water meadows of the Tame Valley. Or three and a quarter miles by the 'high road' – wet planks about two feet above the fields – but even this was impassable during severe flooding. In the first winter it proved an intimidating journey for a five year old.

I can still remember Miss Stevenson looking through the school windows and saying "You had better get your hats and coats on and get off now before the floods get any higher. And remember do **not** go by the low road." Glad we were to get over the causeway with the wobbly handrails and rickety planks. Those daily journeys to Kingsbury Infants School were an unmitigated misery to me and I do not remember them with any pleasure at all. The start was half a mile walk with Mother along the canal side to the lane where we were met and I was put in the charge of an older girl and a couple of boys who, as soon as Mother was out of sight, constantly exhorted me to "hurry up or we shall be late" and "if you don't we will push you off the planks".

My abiding memories of Kingsbury School are the tiered classroom, which frightened me to death, and being sent to sit at the back, which was purgatory. As far as learning was concerned, I learned to dress the maypole (i.e. plait the ribbons). That summer was the only time I have ever needed that knowledge! We also learned to 'gather peascods', a country dance, now forgotten, only practised during that first term. A highlight was the occasional Friday when Mother would collect me on her way to Shropshalls for a joint for the weekend (usually sirloin), then to Froggats for my treat, a ha'penny's worth of desiccated coconut which I would make every effort to last all the long walk home.



Myself with my sister, Nancy, in 1921

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It must have been obvious to Mother, if only from my reluctance to start out each morning, that I was making no progress at Kingsbury at all, so it was decided to send me to Lea Marston some four miles away. Fortunately Mother's sister lived in a canal-side cottage less than half a mile from the school so it was arranged for me to stay with her from Monday to Friday when Mother and Dad would collect me for the weekend at home.

CHAPTER III

Grandly named Pear Tree Villa, my aunt's cottage was in fact two tiny canal cottages knocked into one – its only other distinguishing feature being the pear tree, trained espalier fashion against the end wall. Hence the name. The house was a typical lockside cottage as was ours, two stories at the front, i.e. the canal side, and three stories at the back. The cellars, really basements, had a door and windows at the back and a coal chute at lockside level at the front. The basement room was internally subdivided, the small division having a brick slab, and shelves, and was used for everything from curing a pig to storing potatoes and other dry goods for winter use. The front cellar stored the coal and garden tools etc.

The unique feature of this cottage was the sanitary arrangements. I have never seen the like anywhere. The lavatory was a three holer, outside of course, and so sited to be just below the level of a full lock of water; there was a channel that led through the lock wall under the lavatory and discharged into the lower pound. Undoubtedly efficient but draughty when the lock was empty and resounding with the sound of rushing water when the lock was full. A visit was quite dramatic, only to be contemplated in a case of dire necessity, although gaining the privy itself was slightly preferable to the trek up the garden with a candle lantern on a cold winter's night.

Christmas at Auntie Mary's was especially exciting with all my cousins, usually five or six of us children with my aunts and uncles all crammed together. There were fruits and sweetmeats not normally seen at other times of the year – oranges, bananas, pomegranates, dates, figs and crystallised fruits, obviously hoarded for this occasion over the previous few weeks. A room was set aside for the Christmas tree which was decorated with red candles and one present for everyone placed underneath. We could hardly contain ourselves until the grand opening which took place in the afternoon after Christmas dinner. Then there were games – musical chairs, blind man's buff, etc.

Auntie Mary's husband, Uncle Tom, was somewhat of a character and stories of his exploits were legion. His sitting on the branch of a tree that he was sawing off, or being dragged out of the lock by Auntie Mary when drunk was considered alright for childish ears, but his affairs with local 'ladies' were another thing altogether. Then it was a significant look in our direction and "careful now, little pigs have big ears." References to Mrs G.B. or Mrs P.C. were picked up with glee by our ears. We must have been avid for gossip about our elders as they were for gossip (or better still a bit of scandal) about themselves. For all that, Tom was regarded as a 'useful man to know'. He could always knock up a gate, or a bit of fencing, or a wheelbarrow – an ability not to be sniffed at in the country.

CHAPTER IV

I found that going to school with Billy at Lea Marston during the week at Pear Tree Villa made life much more bearable. The school was for boys only and the pupils never totalled more than thirty. Education standards were not very demanding, reading, writing and basic arithmetic only. Spare time was filled with reading, which for me, in view of the dearth of books at home was a real treat. We also had to learn by rote reams of poetry, which we lads, away from class, took a delight in misquoting: for instance, from The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna:

*They buried him softly at dead of night,
The Sods (long pause) with their bayonets turning,
And by the moonbeams' misty light
And the lantern dimly burning.*

I only remember two boys passing the Grammar School examination in the whole of the eight years that I was there, although two or three farmers' sons were paid for and to be fair, it was a country school and education was angled towards earning a living from the land. Whenever possible our time was spent outdoors, nature study and gardening being our prime subjects. We all had our own allotments and were taught crop rotation and how to dig properly – a great store was set by digging properly. We were also taught basic carpentry. One project was to build a fowl pen, which when accomplished led on to poultry keeping. I never remember having any eggs, though. Bee keeping, with its hint of danger, although popular with us boys, was soon abandoned after a few careless boys got stung. Journeys to school with Billy for company at this time, I always found interesting. If it was not mushrooms, watercress, blackberries or trying to get just out-of-reach moorhen's eggs with a spoon tied to a long stick, we could always try rolling dried oak leaves to make smokes.

What we regarded as good fun – like putting slate on the top of the lock-keeper's hut chimney while he was inside, or scrambling about in the timber and ladder store – was of course regarded as getting



Myself ready for school.

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into mischief. This timber, stored primarily for repairing lock gates, paddles, fences, etc, always held a morbid fascination for us because we thought it also contained the coffin boards. It was a long standing practice of the Canal Company to provide the coffin for long serving employees. The timber for these, oak or elm, was from trees which grew alongside the canal. The arrangement saved the bereaved family considerable expense whilst costing the Company nothing. Although by the time Dad died this practice had been discontinued.

You will gather by now that my childhood, naturally enough, revolved mainly around school and the canal and so it was until I was fourteen when I was pitchforked, totally unprepared, into a factory.

CHAPTER V

Father had migrated to canal employment from Bolton about 1910, following his brothers-in-law, both carpenters, and another brother-in-law and a work-mate, both blacksmiths, who had left the Earl of Bradford's estate in a village in Shropshire a year or two earlier. They all felt, no doubt, that low paid security was better than the uncertainty of employment in a cotton town or on the land, for industry and agriculture had been stagnating for some years – until the Great War erupted and led to dramatic changes for a short time. Looking back now at the situation, I suppose that the job, although low paid, did have its advantages. A cottage was provided by the canal company, although tied, at 2/6d a week rent, and after the amalgamation with the railways, one free pass per year with quarter fare for any other journey along the London, Midland and Scottish network. Coal from passing boats came for free, or the price of a few vegetables or eggs. This was a practice frowned on by the Canal Company, but winked at by the boatmen who would make up a few hundredweight loss by running a like amount of water into the bilges – the coal would soak it up before they reached the toll house.

Although we had very little money, we did at least have a roof over our heads and were largely self sufficient with vegetables from the garden, fowl in the pen, rabbits in the hutch and a pig in the sty. However fond of these animals you might get, they were reared strictly for the pot.

Winters in those days seemed to be harder and appeared to last longer than they do today, although with every lock manned by lock-keepers, navvies or any spare labour available, operations were never suspended until the canal was too full of ice to work the boats. The majority of the traffic was coal for the factories in Birmingham and in an effort to keep them supplied, an icebreaker would be sent out from the city each morning. It was a fine sight to see it in action. Four or six horses coupled line astern with steaming flanks straining at the tow line, and a dozen or so men on the boat rhythmically rocking to aid the attempts to break the ice and prevent the boat rising on to the floes. It was a cold job, only made slightly more bearable by the brazier secured amidships. Mother's coffee was always in demand and I am sure very welcome on these occasions. It was also a highlight in our day and Nancy and I used to hang about listening to snippets of the men's talk and in the hope that we might be given the odd copper or two.

Even now when I think about those winters, in my minds eye I see Dad on the lock side. Muffled up, cap over one eye, fag in the corner of his mouth, dewdrop on the end of his nose, long overcoat, leggings and clogs, the latter a relic of his North Country days amongst horses. At these times, Mother would regale us with stories of her time as a parlour maid before her marriage when 'The Family' would spend part of the winter at their country residence – Ghyl Head, Windermere. Life in the big house was undoubtedly the highlight of her life, what with skating parties on the lake and all the goings on sounding much more attractive than the chapped hands and knees, runny noses and soggy boots that we had to suffer most winters. "Come on in now, we must get them dry ready for school tomorrow" would be the familiar cry. It was in the depths of winter that the daily chores became even more onerous. Fetching milk from the farm, often skirting flooded fields or ankle deep in snow, chopping firewood with frozen fingers, the mile-long trek twice a week for paraffin 'lamp-oil' and bread all seemed particularly trying.

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The icebreaker narrow boat on the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal.

CHAPTER VI

Dad's birthday, March 27th, signified the approaching end of winter and the expeditions that Mother organised annually to the North Wood some three miles away which were eagerly looked forward to. There always seemed an air of mystery about this place which was intersected by deep ditches and thick undergrowth everywhere. Normally out of bounds for us children, it was the nesting place for many birds, pheasants and partridges, many to meet their demise when the shooting season opened in September. Usually patrolled by gamekeepers, it gave to us an added spice of adventure. "We must try and find a few flowers to give to Dad" Mother would say. A few primroses, violets and perhaps daffodils would, besides pleasing Dad, brighten up the house for days.



Father (far left), two of my Bolton relatives, my sister Nancy and Mother (far right) and myself at the canal lock gate.

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The end of winter was a frugal time with fruit scarce or non-existent, celery and green vegetables if not finished, usually had been destroyed by frost. It was the time of year that root vegetables came into their own and rabbit stew with plenty of roots and a chunk of bacon in the pot was a particular favourite. The numbers of our few hens (the cockerel had been eaten at Christmas) were also depleted at this time of the year, they had yet to 'come on to lay' and if one was inadvertently culled that was full of eggs, recriminations inevitably followed.

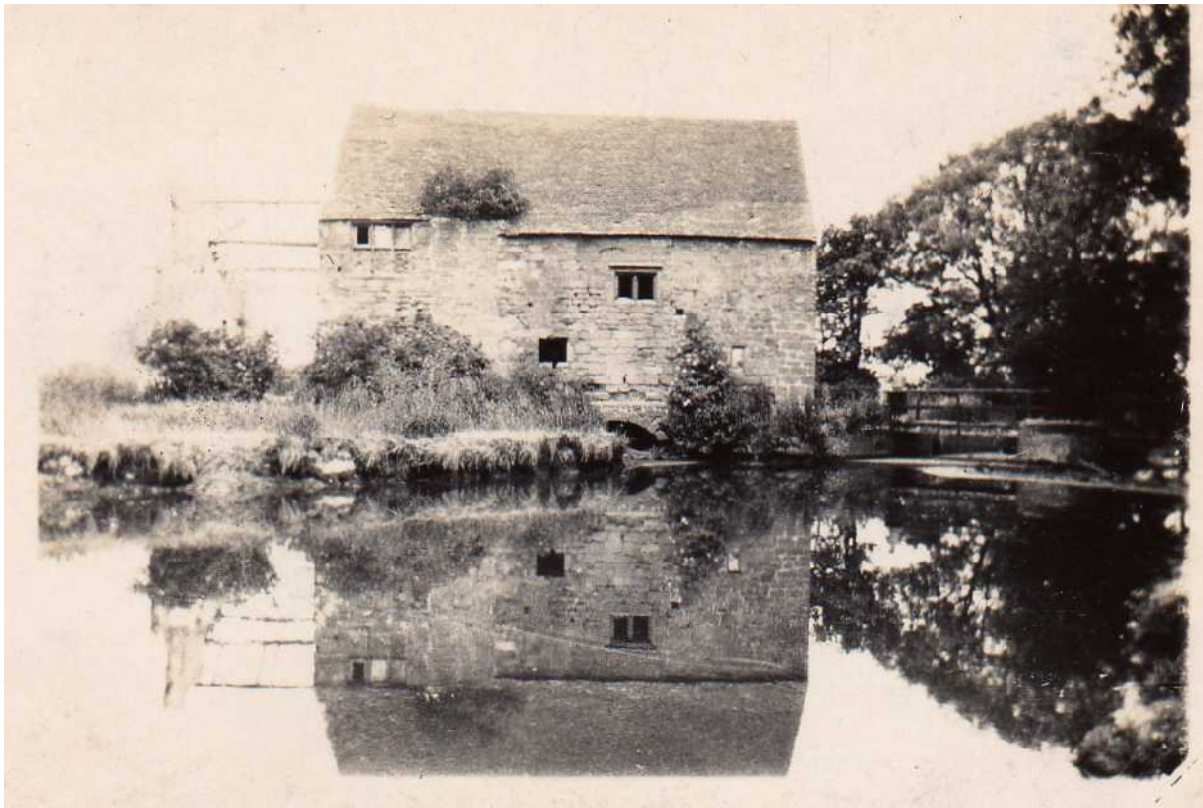
Why is it I wonder that in those days, winters always seemed more severe and summers warmer than they do now? Everything seems blander now or is it that we only remember the extremes and never anything in between?

With the coming of warmer days we were sent out to play into the field where safely out of sight of the grown-ups, with the children from next door we could live in our world of make-believe, playing mothers and fathers, and hospitals, doctors and nurses in the dry ditch under the oak and ash trees. If wet, we would play shop or house on the flight of steps that led to the basement.

CHAPTER VII

Come Easter, the tempo of the countryside starts to quicken. The ritual of starting gardening on Good Friday was, I came to realise, because it was the only time, apart from Christmas that the canal was closed for three days. This was the time for emptying the earth privy down the garden. A separate part of the plot was set aside for this purpose, a trench dug and the excretia dug out and barrowed into the trench which was then dug over and so continued until the job was done. Although we never ate them ourselves, Dad grew some wonderful vegetables from this part of the garden. They were always in demand by boatmen or fishermen from the city to exhibit in the Sunday morning pub shows that were so popular at the time. Twenty inch long beans and twenty pound marrows were the aim. The competition was keen and Grandad always beat us because he knew the trick of feeding his marrows with a length of wool threaded through the stem of the marrow with the ends immersed in a jar of sugar water.

The opening of the fishing season, June 15th, brought the welcome sight of fresh faces and also the prospect of a little extra income. Dad used to sell the fishing tickets at 4d for which he received 1d per ticket commission from the agent who leased the rights from the Birmingham Canal Navigation Co. Mother made jugs of tea for 3d or 4d a jug, made pop (i.e. herb beer made with dandelions and nettles) for 2d or 3d per bottle and sold slab cake at 2d a slice.



Fishers Mill, near Fazeley; a favourite picnic spot

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During the summer, weekends were always busy with plenty of fetching and carrying, although by then I had become the proud possessor of a bike of sorts which made things easier. It consisted of a lady's frame made up of bits and pieces begged from any likely source over a period of months. First thing on Saturday mornings, it was on the bike and along the towpath to Fazeley and to Tamworth to bring back, balanced precariously on the carrier, the things for the fishermen – Woodbines, twist, slab cake and yeast for next weeks pop. However, the method of using dandelions and nettles was soon abandoned when *Mason's Extract of Herbs* became available. The concentrated essence was much more reliable than the hit and miss results obtained from the hedgerow. Then on Sundays it was running up and down the canal side selling tickets and drumming up customers for Mother's jugs of tea, etc.

CHAPTER VIII

Now was the time to think about next winter's supply of ham and bacon and to this end Dad was determined to earn a few extra shillings to buy a piglet. So he undertook to help a local farmer with the haymaking, who hearing of Dad's intention said, tongue-in-cheek, "I'll tell you what, Bob, I have a sow that has just farrowed, you can have one if you can catch it." And so it was arranged. On the following day Dad turned up at the farmyard with an empty sack over his shoulder, me in tow, to face a ring of derisive spectators round the sty, all expecting some good sport. So Dad was let into the sty to face a suspicious sow and nine or ten piglets. The scrabbling in the muck, squeaks and flying arms and legs caused much merriment among the onlookers. Dad eventually emerged mucky and triumphant with a wriggling, squealing weaner in the sack. Everyone seemed happy enough, and Dad seemed well pleased, but I thought it the most demeaning spectacle that I had ever seen – my Dad brought down to the level of the pigs! I think that my lifelong aversion to farmers started right then.

However, this episode was to come to an abrupt end after feeding it for several months. It was the most efficient disposer of kitchen waste – anything and everything went down the same way and this trait was to lead to its ultimate demise. Greedily chobbling at some cabbage stalks, the roots of which not having been shaken free of soil, it inadvertently swallowed a stone. The strangled noises from the sty alerted Dad to the impending catastrophe. Panic station! "Rigby, run and fetch 'Old Mason' (the local pig killer) – tell him to bring his tools – we must get it killed quick if we are to save it." A pig that dies naturally is useless for food so there was a real sense of urgency.

Pig killing in those days was a noisy, gruesome and messy business from which we children were usually excluded. It necessitated rigging up a gallows, which meant dismantling our swing and fitting pulley blocks to the cross bar so that the unfortunate pig could be strung up by the back legs and the blood drained away after its execution. Also required was a copper full of boiling water to scald the bristles off, or if we were to have smoked bacon, a bale of straw to burn them off. So after treatment by fire or water the carcase had to be scraped to remove the remaining bristles then strung up again for splitting and quartering. Then the women's work would really start. Everything in a pig is edible – feet, tongue, liver, lights, intestines – the lot. We, and the neighbours, sharing was the order of the day - they then reciprocated in turn, made sure that there was always enough to go round. We all lived royally for a few days, disposing of all the offal, trotters, faggots, brawn and suchlike as there were no freezers in those days. We children had the bladder washed and blown up like a balloon and tied to a stick to play with.

CHAPTER IX

Referring back to the privilege tickets on offer from the railway company, although they were widely used by railway employees, very few canal workers took advantage of the facility. Mother, who, remember, had seen something of 'how the other half lived' before her marriage, was determined that Nancy and I should also. To this end all the money from 'the fishing was put by for this purpose.

Although the whole of the L.M.S. railway network was available, we alone of the village families had regular seaside holidays. These holidays ranged along the whole West Coast from Weston-super-Mare to Morecombe Bay which was the full extent of the L.M.S. network. Llandudno was our favourite. Mother would rent an apartment with 'cooking' – one room and bedroom only. We bought in the food and the landlady did the cooking. So when the great day came, we would set out to walk to the nearest railway station, some five miles, laden not only with our luggage but also a cold cooked chicken, plenty of runner beans and rhubarb ("it will do you good and save buying it when we get there"). We always stayed at Crag-y-Don – not that we would have cared where we stayed as long as it was the 'seaside'. I still have happy memories of Llandudno. Professor Codman's Punch and Judy and the Happy Valley pierrot shows, and for the next fifty years I made every effort to walk the five mile coastal road round the Great Orme's Head. Surely one of the most striking coastal walks in Wales.

By the time I was about eight or so, I had given up staying at my aunt's during the week and walked from home to school daily. Strangely, although alone, I never felt lonely. The journey, partly by field path, was mainly by towpath. The tedium of puddle hopping was occasionally relieved by a sympathetic boatman offering a lift, when I would arrive home splattered with coal dust to announce triumphantly "Mum, Mr. College let me steer the boat today".

It was when I was about ten that disaster struck. Sports were always on Friday afternoons and one Friday when playing cricket the ball was swiped out of the playground – "right Taylor, you knocked it out" was the chorus "you fetch it back". Climbing up the fence and standing on the top cross rail, I jumped and crack! My ankle had stuck between the palings. Then the nightmare started; I don't remember being lifted off the fence but I remember being taken home in a farm cart. Left with a twisted leg on the sofa at home, it was Sunday before we could find a doctor to attend. His verdict – a hospital job. It was Monday before a farm cart could be procured to take me to Tamworth Hospital and the afternoon before I was given the chloroform sponge and blessed oblivion.

It was night time when I awoke and seeing a gas jet flaring on the wall opposite, thought that the hospital was on fire. Being used to paraffin lamps and candles, I had never seen gas lighting before, especially the flaring effect of a broken mantle. My outstanding memories of that episode are of being tormented by a youth carrying the Farraday muscle stimulation apparatus threatening to attach it to the string and weight attached to my splints. I, a country boy, was not to know that electricity could not be transmitted up a piece of string.

The other thing was pure farce. I was left stranded sitting on a chamber pot – the weight inexorably dragging me towards the bottom of the bed when visitors were announced,

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there to sit in acute discomfort for an hour and a half. To complete my embarrassment, my Aunt had brought me a large bunch of flowers from the garden which I had to sit clutching. I also spent a lot of time re-winding used bandages, only if they were too blooded and matted were they discarded. Without doubt standards have improved – re-using is unheard of today.

A long period of convalescence followed, which effectively put paid to any chance I might have had of sitting for the Grammar School examinations. Allowed back to school once more, it was by bike to ease my walking and on condition that I cycled by road which was a mile further. It was not long before I was again taking the short cut along the canal towpath. Although I thought nothing of it at the time, the recurring nightmare that I used to have of a canal bridge closing in on me as I cycled under it and pushing me into the water stayed with me until I married and moved away from the canal side.

Domestic animals – we had a dog and a cat, a ginger tom, which if not carefully watched would jump off the garden wall onto the boat horses back; the ensuing mayhem of a bucking horse and cursing boatmen was an experience always remembered. From time to time we had bantam cockerels, 'kindly' lent to us by a boatman to 'look after for a bit'. They were vicious creatures with long, sharp spurs and would fly at you on the least provocation. It was not for some years that I realised that they were fighting cocks. Cockfighting, although illegal, was still practised in some parts of the Black Country. When things got too hot for the matchmakers, the birds were passed from hand to hand until they finally ended up in some backwater like ours, well away from the eyes of the law.

CHAPTER X

So the years went on only enlivened by holidays, or visits to Dad's or Mother's old homes.

At Bolton, Dad's two brothers still ran the family business, a haulage business. The highlight of these visits was to be allowed to take the reins and drive the horse and cart through the town to the cotton mills from where we carted away the loads of cinders from the big Lancashire boilers that drove the mills. Little did I realise that it was not myself that drove the horses but the horses that guided me. They knew the route so well they followed it from habit. They only had to be pulled wide round the corners of the cobbled streets where iron bollards were set in pavements to prevent the horses short cutting and the cart wheels running over the feet of unwary pedestrians. A quaint bye-law of the period allowed a carter to urinate against the rear offside wheel of a cart at any time providing the carter was at least three miles from a convenience. I wonder if this bye-law has ever been repealed?

The stables, hayloft reached by a vertical ladder fastened to the wall, and implement shed all offered exciting possibilities especially the chaff cutter with its element of danger that I, under close supervision, was allowed to operate occasionally.

Dad's Aunt, my great aunt, also lived in the family home. She it was who ran the shop, also part of the business. It was a grocery and general stores reminiscent of 'Open All Hours'. Dad held her in high esteem for she brought them all up after his Mother died. That is how I came to have a somewhat unusual Christian name. Her name was Betsy Rigby, so naming me Rigby was Dad's way of saying thank you.

Visits to Grandad Debney (note – Mother not to be outdone had her maiden name inserted on my birth certificate) were in complete contrast to visits to Bolton and entailed a three mile walk across fields from Newport, Shropshire to the Outwoods, the hamlet where Grandad and Grandma lived. I always thought that Grandad must be of independent means because he owned the cottage and a third of an acre of ground on which it stood. On reflection I realised that he must have been over seventy when I was born – it was not surprising that all he seemed to do was trifle about in the garden.

My Debney forbears had lived in this remote corner of Shropshire for countless generations, following a way of life as predictable as day follows night. The area is aptly described in 'Sweet Vernal' by Jean Margaret Peace. The chapter on Aqualate being of especial interest for the reference it makes to the ancestral owners 'The Giffords don't-you-know', who were the Conqueror's standard bearers at Hastings. Although our family records seem to peter out in the fourteenth century, land deeds record a Widow Daubney, a freeholder in 1360. In fact this freehold (a lease from the crown at a nominal fee) was not annulled until one of the early Debneys wanted to sell a bit of land in the early nineteenth century.

Finding it difficult to give credence to the family talk of a French connection, and thinking it unlikely that the colonising Normans would ever find their way to such a remote area I decided to do a bit of research and if possible debunk the idea. To my surprise I found that there had been a Roman road from the junction of Watling Street (now the A5) at Gailey, to Chester that passed within half a mile of Aqualate and the Outwoods. After the retreat of the

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Romans the abandonment of this road enabled the Normans some hundreds of year later to use it to complete the subjugation of the area. By the mid thirteenth century there were in the Shropshire area only six native families left, and they had all intermarried with the conqueror's colonists and taken French names (ref. Stafford Castle records). So I was forced to conclude that there might be some truth in the 'French Connection' after all.



My grandfather Taylor near Bolton, Lancashire.

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The pace of life in this hidden corner of Shropshire governed as it was by the changing seasons and the daylight hours had a predictability about it seldom if ever encountered today. There were tasks that had to be performed every day, whatever. The trek across the fields to fetch the milk from the farm, kindling had to be gathered and dried before a fire could be made for a breakfast cup of tea, and water drawn from the well – enlivened sometimes by also drawing up a frog in the pail. All personal as well as domestic washing was done outside, invariably in cold water. A bowl on a bench under the aged yew tree in the garden afforded the only shelter and obviously no privacy.

CHAPTER XI

By now I was coming up to fourteen and we had moved to the canal-side at Tyburn. Not that the household amenities were any better than at Bodymoor Heath. We moved lock, stock and barrel by canal boat one fine summer day to find the layout of the new home depressingly familiar, same old basement, two middle rooms at lock-side level, the only difference being an extra bedroom which led out of the bedroom I was destined to occupy. An ash privy and pigsty in the garden completed the scene. The plus points for Mother were the extra bedroom for Nancy who was then twelve and fast growing up, and the house being situated near the town where supposedly the job prospects for us children were better. The other big plus of which we were not aware at the time of moving was the shortly to be laid gas main past our house. It is not until you have lived without a power supply that you realise the benefits of a mains supply.

Because I was thirteen and a half it was not thought worthwhile changing schools and so I continued to bike it to Lea Marston. Come November 1928 the school did make one attempt to find me a job before I left. Remember, we had only been educated for the outdoor life and, as I was a bit spindly, my prospects with the country in a state of depression were not too bright. However, along with two other lads I was sent along to see the local nurseryman. The interview was short and not particularly sweet. We were all lined up behind a wheelbarrow full of manure. To the smallest of us he said, pointing to a greenhouse some thirty yards away "wheel the barrow up there". No chance. Then to me "now you". I managed about two yards. Then to the big boy who had had no trouble with the barrow at all, he said "You can start Monday". End of interview.

With the prospects of work on the land non-existent, when Dad heard that they were setting on lads at the Moss Gear Co. he said that I had better go and 'try my luck'. "You will at least get thirty-eight shillings a week when you are grown up and that is three shillings better than I get, and not outdoors in all weathers at that." If you did get a job, "Get your head down and keep it down" was the motto at the time.

So along with about thirty other fourteen to sixteen year olds I started work. It was January 1929. We were a motley crew, toughies from the back streets of Aston, Birmingham, surely some of the worst slums in England, lads from new housing estates round about – built after the Great War for returning ex-servicemen – homes fit for heroes to live in – but no jobs to go to, and one or two country boys like me driven as a last resort to factory work.

Little did my father know the sort of life he was letting me in for. The first humiliation came when I was sent to start work in short trousers, it was a tearful me who pleaded for 'longs' to go to work in like all the others. The industrial depression of the thirties was just starting to bite and grim factory conditions were taken for granted. Unemployment, shortly to climb to over three million (1931) meant that hardship and poverty among the unemployed had to be seen to be believed.

On reflection I think that youths were slightly better placed for employers were reluctant to pay adult wages if they could employ youths instead, and to make matters worse it was becoming a common practice to employ girls in engineering factories.

CHAPTER XII

It was against this background that I started my working life. It was no wonder that the atmosphere was tense, on the Friday before Christmas they had laid off thirty adults and then started us in January.

We were subjected to many sly digs and nasty remarks from the remaining men, especially the toolsetters who had to show us how to do work previously done by married men with families to support and now on the dole. After the application of the means test our ten shillings a week was often the only income for a whole family. I went to the home of such a lad, a new house, the father had been a serving soldier in India, discharged, was unemployed and had been means tested. Families were not considered destitute if there was any furniture in the house, in their efforts to feed the family everything had been sold except the table and a bed, seating was on orange boxes, and cups were stone jam jars. Although they accepted their plight with apparent stoicism I could have cried for them, and felt most embarrassed that we did at least have the necessities that made living tolerable.

Certain events I still remember, three minutes late for work and you were locked out and lost half a day's pay. The filthy habits of the foreman who continually patrolled the lines of us machinists urging us to greater efforts with sly jabs between the ribs. We were allowed to make a can of tea – a spoonful of tea, another of sugar with a spoonful of condensed milk in a screw of newspaper constituted a brew – to drink during the day. The foreman who always wore a billycock – a mark of his authority – and a bow tie, expected tea to be left in every can in case he fancied a swig. He was a tobacco chewer, a common enough practice at the time, and failure to leave the expected drop of tea in your can often resulted in a stream of tobacco juice being ejected into the offender's can.

Two lads I particularly remember were the foreman's sons – sixteen and eighteen years old – they expected and got favourable treatment, the easiest jobs, etc. They lived in a tough area of Aston and both boxed for the Holt Boxing Club and were at best humoured if not avoided.

Because of my country background I was always being picked on, but was fortunate in being befriended by a Scotsman, who, recently demobbed from the Seaforth Highlanders surreptitiously taught me how to look after myself. The day came when after a particularly bad bout of aggravation I suddenly found myself looking down at my tormentor on the floor. I don't remember hitting him but Jock was holding me back saying, "All right, that's enough, you have proved your point now get back to your machines." To Eric's credit he did not tell his dad, it would have been the sack for me. The ragging stopped, we became quite friendly and I even went to the Holt two or three times but it was not really my scene and I stopped going.

The toilet facilities were worth a mention, the flush systems were at least an improvement on the earth privy at home. New and up to date they were but there was no privacy allowed at all, the cubicles had batwing half doors only, with a timekeeper-cum-cleaner always in attendance, we were allowed three minutes for a wee and five minutes for a longer job, then it was "time you were back to you machines."

NARROW BOATS AND WIDE HORIZONS

We worked a piecework system, and were constantly harassed by the foreman, but it was the introduction of a new and even more diabolical system that was to lead to my revolt.

CHAPTER XIII

After the family move from Bodymoor Heath to Tyburn the start of working life engendered a new and more realistic outlook on life. Gone were the country ways, their place taken by a more urban style of living. Shopping was easier and the shops more accessible, entertainments available, the 'pictures' were the highlight of the week. The installation of gas lighting meant no more messy paraffin or smelly lamps. Replacing gas mantles was a small price to pay for the benefit of brilliant light at the turn of a tap. The keeping of a pig was soon abandoned in favour of the local butcher's shop, likewise the keeping of hens. Although the income from fishing had now ceased, my wages, all of ten shillings a week, helped to redress the balance and pay for the books, uniforms, etc, required by Nancy who was still attending Tamworth High School.

It was about this time that I had my first close acquaintance with death. A boatman called over to Dad, "Bob, a stiff 'un 'as jus' come to the top a couple of 'undred yards up the cut, it's all yours." Dad said, "Come and give me a hand Rigby; you've got to see one sometime and it may as well be now." So with a sack and a boathook over his shoulder, we set out, the body was not a pretty sight, but worth eighteen pence to Dad for the retrieval.

Our chapel days were also behind us and Nancy and I were attending St. Barnabas Parish Church in Erdington – and I the Young Men's Bible Class. The Christian principles taught there were difficult, if not impossible to reconcile with factory life where the outlook was not only agnostic but openly derisive.

I had been working for about six months when Mother, who had not been well for some time, had to go into hospital. A Woman's Complaint, Dad said. Hysterectomy operations sixty years ago were only in their infancy then and Mother was, I think, something of a guinea pig. Children were not allowed to visit the Women's Hospital in Birmingham so it was almost three months before we saw her again. She sent us several letters but it brought a lump to my throat when I received a pigskin purse sent from the Convalescent Home at Cleeve Prior, for my 15th birthday. It suddenly brought home to me how much I had missed her and that she was thinking of me too.

During most of this period, Dad was working 'away' and was out of the house from six a.m. to seven at night. I, working close to home was last out in the morning and first in at night so was responsible for most of the meals and little jobs like plaiting Nancy's waist long hair before school. She soon had it cut when she started work. If it had only been cut while she was at school, I should have been spared hours of nit-combing.

As soon as I was fifteen I was eligible to work overtime and I came to an arrangement with Mother whereby I handed over my wage packet in return for nine-pence pocket money plus half my overtime earnings, which enabled me to take five pounds (two year's savings) to the local cycle shop for a deposit on the 'proper' bike that I had set my heart on. A B.S.A. Super-Eeze, guaranteed to last thirty years. And it did! It finally ended up in the back of the greenhouse with a blackbird's nest in the forks.

CHAPTER XIV

I was sixteen, Nancy fourteen, when we were seconded from St. Barnabus to Pye Hayes where a church to serve the new estates was in the course of construction. We were to become Sunday School teachers and help to get a youth club started. Church activities took up all our spare time for the next two years and left a lasting impression on me. Whilst friendships were being forged at the Young Peoples' Association (Y.P.A.), one, for me, was more permanent than most. Joan and I celebrated our Golden Wedding last year.

Life at work was becoming ever more onerous. I was seventeen when the company introduced the hated 'Bedaux' Premium Bonus System. Basically the system worked like this: A prime machining operation was divided into sub-operations. These operations were timed individually with a stop watch, totted up and divided by the whole to arrive at an average. Only by improving on the average could any bonus be earned, but it was virtually impossible to improve the average. The system was universally disliked and caused widespread unrest in the engineering industry before being dropped altogether. I gave it three weeks and although there were three million unemployed, I decided to try and make a move.

Eventually, I found another job, at Hordern, Mason and Edwards, as an 'Engineering Improver' which was only a synonym for cheap labour. The work was hard, heavy and dirty and with a charge hand always hovering in the background, I soon found out that apart from a better basic rate, day work was not a lot different from piece work. The factory was in the most squalid area of Birmingham city centre, due for demolition under a slum clearance order, the big attraction initially for me was the fact that their new factory was to be built within a stone's throw of our house at Tyburn.

Built in the early years of the nineteenth century, the only improvements in the intervening years had been the installation of direct current electric motors which were driven by a gas engine. Lighting was by gas and we were expected to work to tolerances of thousandths of an inch and if one complained of poor light in the winter the only remedy was the issue of a candle. Hours were from seven in the morning to six at night and eight until one on Saturdays. Canteen facilities were non-existent. If you wanted a hot meal it had to be done on the blacksmith's shovel. The best dinner we used to get was fish and chips – you don't bother about the cooking conditions which in this slum area were anything but hygienic, especially when you are hungry. I, being single was better off than most and could afford the two pence for a fish and one penny for some scallops, potato slices fried in batter. We would sit in the pavement outside to eat them and many is the time we used to have urchins come up begging "gee us a chip mister". Bare foot, ragged clothes, snotty faces – who could refuse?

Toilets were equally primitive – stalls with no doors – large drain pipes, flange end upwards were set in concrete. They discharged directly into Hockley Brook which set in a culvert also served other slum properties on its way, untreated, to join the River Tame. The favourite sport was dropping lighted newspapers down and then assuming an air of innocence when the irate womenfolk from the houses downstream came knocking at the factory complaining.

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After about six months the new factory which was just across the field from home, was ready and with the move came the prospect of more leisure and most inviting, mid-day lunches at home. Life in the new factory was, generally speaking, much more congenial and was only marred by the fact that the next machinist to me was another tobacco chewer. The procedure never varied. A fresh ounce of tobacco was each morning divided into a plug to chew and a bit for the tobacco pouch. At night the chewed bit was wad left to dry and next morning was put into the pouch mixed with the fresh weed and smoked during the day. The theory at the time was that constant expectoration of the juice prevented the cast iron dust from the machining operations settling on your chest. Maybe it did help, but clouds of stinking pipe smoke and constant expectoration was rather less than pleasant to work by.



Myself at work, fourth from left, at Hordern, Mason and Edwards

Friendly arguments often developed on the shop floor, nobody paying much attention; words like sod, bloody and bugger being part of the everyday conversation. One such argument ended dramatically with a knock down punch being thrown. After parting them, I took the fellow on one side and said, "what was all that about, then?" "Well, he called me a bastard, didn't he!" As if that was sufficient explanation in itself. The word itself was not normally sufficient to justify fisticuffs. I could not help but feel sympathetic. I had known him from our school days and knew that he was reputed to be the result of one of Uncle Tom's dalliances.

However, the factory was light and airy, the work although still heavy, making power press castings weighing up to ten tons each, was made easier by the fact that I was given a

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brand new machine to operate. Although I was the youngest there, I was a quick learner and was soon accepted as 'one of them' and treated as an equal by all the others. I was glad to be shut of biking to and from Birmingham every day. There was nothing worse than being stuck in the tram lines in the wet and ending up sprawled in a puddle of water at the junction of Aston Road and Miller Street.

I could now use my new bike for what it was intended, to get out into the country whenever the opportunity afforded.

My first real experience of camping was an event that I was always to remember. Invited by one of my new found friends who was a member of a Black Country Chapel Youth Club, we cycled together to Malvern and camped at Cowleigh Gate Farm (now a Youth Hostel). The rest of the club made their way there by train or bus. The idea of mixed camping in those days was regarded as 'very way out' but proprieties were strictly observed. We were just a group of young people enjoying ourselves with no idea of war clouds forming on distant horizons. It was Whitsuntide and the weather was glorious. I had never seen such lush meadows – buttercups, moon daisies, wild orchids and grasses of every description. Every night at eleven forty five precisely until four a.m. the nightingales brought the night alive with their song. The fact that we were kept awake most of the night did not bother us at all, it was just wonderful to be awake and there.

After one last walk over the hills it was time to break camp and go home. We had no money but had had a glorious weekend. Three of us biking back stopped at the 'Live and Let Live' at Droitwich, pooled our resources and had just enough coppers left for half a pint of cider and bread and cheese – a fitting end to the weekend.

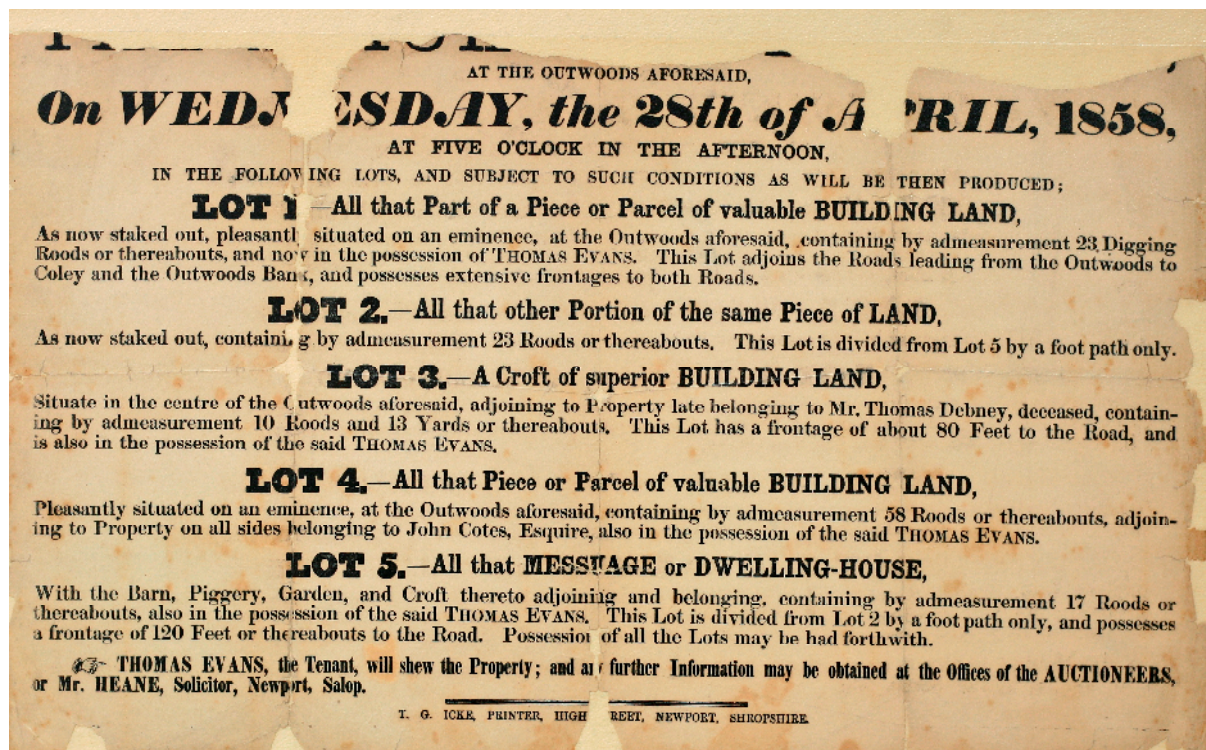


Myself camping

CHAPTER XV

Grandma Debney had spent her last two declining years with us or with Aunt Mary, Grandad having died some two years previously she had become too frail to live alone. In her mid-eighties I can see her now, sitting in her armchair, the legs shortened to suit her small stature, silver hair done in a bun, steel rimmed glasses from Woolworths, a black apron, with always a clean handkerchief in the pocket. She would fish out, from somewhere in her voluminous skirts, a ten shilling note and say "See if you can get me a gill of ale lad." Usually there was Mother standing somewhere in the background imperceptibly shaking her head, very much against Drink was Mother. Grandma, poor dear, farmer's daughter and publican's wife, did so miss her drop of comfort and had to make do with the black teapot that was always left on the hob for her benefit.

Mentally she never really left the Outwoods where she had spent her lifetime, so when the time came we carried out her last wishes and 'buried her with ham' in the traditional country manner and took her to rest with Grandad at the church at Morton that his father and two brothers had built in 1823-25. The day in late May was bright and sunny, Grandma's nephew, an undertaker, 'did' the funeral and after the internment everyone repaired to the 'Rising Sun' where the landlord, another nephew, had laid on a meal (with ham) as fitting for the occasion. Afterwards we played bowls or drank, or both, the ladies exchanged family gossip and we youngsters tried to surmise how and to whom everyone was related. So all in all, a good time was had by all. Granny would have loved it.



Bill of sale for the Debney family property at Outwoods, Shropshire

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After much wrangling among the family, it was decided to sell the cottage at the Outwoods. Mother, who was against the sale, created a scene in the auction room at Newport Town Hall, the auctioneer, after intervening with a "Madam, are we selling or not?" , finally knocked the cottage, "this desirable residence", down for 135 guineas, which after the estate was settled, amounted to £16 for each of the beneficiaries. End of an era. There are still Debneys in the village, but of our branch, none.

CHAPTER XVI

The five years 1933 - 38 were probably my most affluent years. I was now seeing more and more of Joan Ripley, we were both earning good money and we were able to take in all the popular attractions of the time, the Prince of Wales Theatre in Birmingham and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon being our favourites. Olivier's Henry V in 1934 and the speech before Agincourt I shall never forget. Being stranded on Hatton Railway Station at midnight after a show, and having to catch the milk train to Birmingham at 4 a.m, Joan was not allowed out after 10 p.m after that episode. The first time out afterwards was to the Lickey Hills chaperoned by her parents, as her Dad liked a drink we somehow missed the last train back to Birmingham at 11.30 p.m. So after a lot of "I told you we didn't do it on purpose" we were allowed out together again.

By now I had bought a tandem, so together with another couple from Hodern, Mason and Edwards we were able to cycle further afield than had been previously possible. Although a weekend jaunt to Harlech and weekend camping expeditions always gave rise to family misgivings. In fact after cycling to see my aunt at Bolton, my Aunt gave Joan a lecture on the dire consequences that would result from wearing short trousers, "You'll suffer, my girl, in years to come exposing your knees like that."



*Myself with Joan on a lockgate
on the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal*

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On my tandem with Joan (we even cycled from Birmingham to Harlech and to Bolton on this bike).



Joan with my tandem.

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It was 1934, I was twenty, my two cycling mates had left for other more lucrative jobs so naturally I felt the urge too. I applied for and got a job at the Wolseley Sheep Shearing Machine Co., not telling them my age. Toolsetters were not judged to have had sufficient experience until they were over twenty-one. When after three months they discovered my true age I had to suffer a cut in wages from £2-8s to £1-18s until I became twenty-one.

In 1936 Wolseley who, on the Ministry of Defence contracting lists, started to neglect the Australian and New Zealand sheep shearing trade taking on instead contracts from the Ministry for small arms manufacture. I judged that no way was there likely to be a war so when Joan's Dad offered to get me a job interview in the Machine Tool Department at Dunlop I jumped at it. I got the job and felt particularly justified after Chamberlain came back from Munich brandishing the now infamous piece of paper. 'Peace in our time'; how wrong can you get? The only thing he bought was time.

We believed it would be peace because, above all, we wanted to believe it.



Myself and Joan on holiday at New Brighton, August 1935

CHAPTER XVII

Life at Dunlop was difficult at first; the men were not friendly and viewed any newcomer with suspicion. I was to learn that reputedly they possessed collectively the highest degree of skill in the Midlands, an ability they zealously guarded.

Although not a closed shop there was strong union representation. I as a non-member was getting the cold shoulder treatment and after three or four weeks I was just about ready to pack the job up when an incident happened that was to change the situation completely. The management had started a new hand and when the shop steward sidled by and out of the corner of his mouth said "Don't 'ave anythin' to do with 'im 'e's a non-er.", in a flash my problems became blindingly clear – I was a non-member too. Grabbing a spanner I jumped down from the platform on which I stood, grabbed him and said "Hang on a minute, mate, you must be the bloke who has been putting the poison down for me. Well let me tell you that I too am a non-er, but only because I have never worked in a union shop before. If I were asked properly no doubt I will join, but in the meantime keep well clear of me, or else."

After a quiet couple of days one of the men casually said, "There's a union meeting in the Co-op Hall on Friday night. If you care to come along I thought I might propose you for membership. Alright?" Presenting myself, not without some misgivings, at the hall on the following Friday, I was met at the door by the man who operated the machine next to me in the daytime. "I've been asked to second your proposal for membership," he announced. "It'll be alright, you'll see," he added. And so it was. The Amalgamated Engineering Union at that time operated rather like an exclusive club with an extensive information network throughout the trade. Non acceptance by the A.E.U. could and did make a deal of difference not only to where you worked by your standing among contemporaries in the factory. Even though my arm had in a manner of speaking been twisted, joining, as it turned out later, proved to be a good idea.

It was now 1937 and it was inevitable that I began to form new friendships, one such , with Les Mills and his newly wed wife Win enabled me to initiate Joan into the pleasures of weekend camping and the pleasures of the open countryside. Les also had a tandem, and being a married couple they were considered by our elders to be suitable chaperones for us. This type of pastime was considered to be asking for trouble or at the least a 'bit way out' in the days before sex-education was available to all. It took a war to change things – unbeknown to us only two years away.



Myself in 1936

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Joan Ripley, myself and friend at the campsite



Joan and myself

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The increased time that we were now spending together at weekends, Les had a permanent campsite at Arley, Worcestershire, on the banks of the River Severn, away from the constraints at home only seemed to bring us closer together and it was not long before Joan and I announced our intention to marry.

CHAPTER XVIII

By now we were drifting apart from our cycling companions from Hoder, Mason & Edwards and Wolseley Sheep Shearing Co. Fred and Clara were recently married, and Joe and May were engaged to be married. Joe and I decided we would have one last weekend camping, we both realised that the pattern of our lives was about to change.

I was working nights at Dunlop so after coming off shift I set out to meet him at 6am one Saturday morning. We cycled to Church Stretton, Shropshire and pitched tent in the Carding Mill Valley. Utterly fagged out we slept like logs, waking at about 9pm our first thought was, no food – a quick run up to the farm for eggs, bacon, bread and milk, then another quick jaunt to the local, The Green Dragon I think, for some supper before they closed at 10pm.

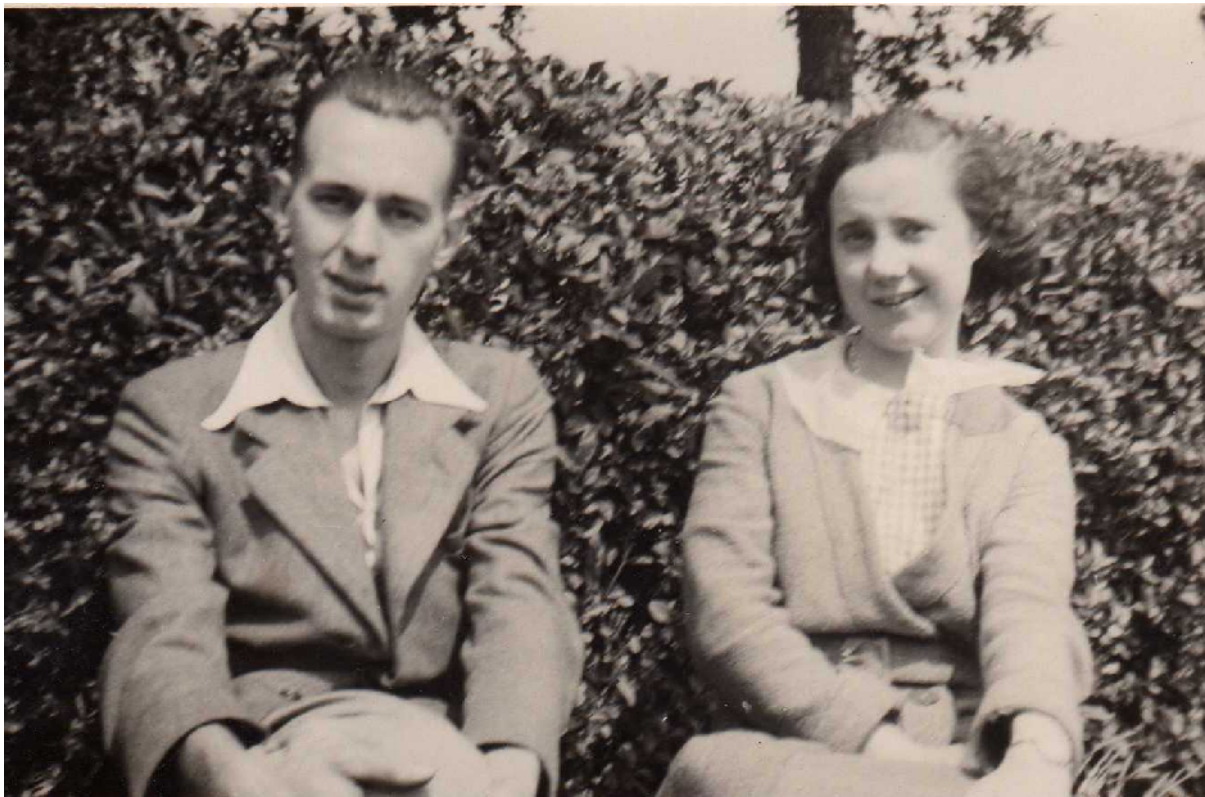
Not having eaten since the previous midnight we were famished, enquiring of the landlord, he said, "Well now we haven't got much, you don't get much call you know! However he produced a loaf, a hunk of cheese a couple of onions and a pint apiece. Calling for another pint sometime later we asked what time he closed, he said, "The terms of my licence say that I shall provide sustenance at all times for weary travellers, and you two certainly looked weary."

Next day after a restful night and a late meal of bacon and eggs we were washing plates in the stream when two girls came strolling down the valley. After the usual chat one said, "Where are you sleeping tonight? Not in that little tent surely – look, we are maids in the big house up the valley, the Master and Mistress are in London tonight – why not come up?" Anxious not to lose face we said we'd think about it. The "Are we going or not" went on between us until well after 10pm when it was, "Ah well I suppose it is too late now." Had we a conscience? Felt a bit shy? Ignorant in these matters? Or a bit of all three? I shall never decide but I felt that we made the right decision.

CHAPTER XIX

Joan and I were now saving hard, our immediate objective was to save £100 to set up home. We were both determined that we would not start our married life living with either of our parents, which was fairly customary at the time.

One of our favourite walks was over the Catshill area of Walmley then being developed by speculative builders. So early in 1939 our £100 objective being in sight I made a deposit of £5 to secure a plot of land for the building of a semi-detached house. Warnings of doom and disaster from the parents, "People in your station of life don't buy houses, and anyway you will be putting a millstone round your necks that you will never lose" was the cry. However, we went ahead and, when in due course the foundations were laid, paid another £20 to secure. We set the wedding day for Sept 9th 1939, and preparations went ahead against the ever threatening background of noises from Adolf in Europe, none of which seemed of any account to us busy planning our own lives.



Myself with Joan

That was until Sunday Sept 3rd, when "the Prime Minister has some grave news to announce," came over the wireless. "This is your Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain speaking. It is with regret that I have to inform you that we are now at war with Germany."

Consternation all round. Nobody thought it could really happen again only twenty years after 'The War to End all Wars'. What to do now? With the wedding ceremony

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organised, 60 friends and relations invited, the reception ordered, furniture (enough for one room upstairs and one room downstairs ordered or delivered, and the honeymoon agreed. We decided to go ahead and ignore the war for a week, in the event we only had to cancel the honeymoon – all train timetables were cancelled for the duration. We couldn't care less, life for us just then was one long honeymoon, and never mind the probability that we might be bombed to bits at any moment.

CHAPTER XX

So we come to the end of the 1930s which, for me, despite the uncertainties of the future, ended on a joyous note.

For the first months of the war we were, thankfully, spared any knowledge of the trials to come, so it seems fitting to end these reminiscences on that momentous day in September, our wedding day. The sun shone, the ceremony went without a hitch, the reception was most successful, and the only slight contretemps was that the photographer failed to turn up. So, all in all, a good time was had by everyone.

We decided that as we could not honeymoon by train (no car then) that we would slip away, un-noticed we hoped, during the evening and spend our first night together in our new home. Safely away, un-noticed, it was with enormous pleasure and pride that we wandered round the rooms savouring what to me at least, was the previously unsampled luxury of electric light, a bathroom with a real bath, a toilet indoors, hot and cold running water upstairs and down and, last but not least, clean cooking by electricity. All these amenities are taken for granted these days but had been noticeably absent in my life until then.

However, the first night in our new home was not to pass without incident. We were asleep, bed downstairs, we did not know when to expect the bombs, when rustle, rustle, rustle, the sudden tramp of feet and the army stationed nearby, seeing the group of figures round our front door, came, trigger happy, to investigate. Came the challenge, in a voice loud enough to wake the neighbourhood, "HALT, who goes there?" Momentary silence then in a whisper, "Shut up you silly sod – they are just married and we have come to decorate the house up a bit."



Classic is the Englishman's ability to turn an awkward situation into pure farce.